

“Wisdom” Epiphany 2025, January 5 © Teresa Elder Hanlon

CCL: Sirach/Wisdom 24:1-5a, 12-20; Psalm 141 “Our Breath is Incense” Bruxvoort Colligan; Ephesians 3:1-11 FNV;
Matthew 2: 1-12 FNV

What strikes me about Wisdom as she is described in the first reading, is that she cannot be missed by her witnesses. This lush description appeals to all of our senses. We hear her voice as she sings out her identity that’s rooted in the Source of Being, the Cosmic Creator. She exudes the scent of cinnamon and incense. She’s actually taken root in people, and grown visibly magnificent—as tall as cypresses (those are the trees you often see rising up in van Gogh paintings). She’s also like tress by the river that are saturated, glorious. And she is giving — blossoms that turn to fruit. You can taste wisdom in such a way that your body feels like it has eaten sweet grapes and honey. And this sensual journey is not for a few minutes, but in abundance, even into eternity. Wisdom is as sweeping and evident as mist or hoar frost.

So how is it that Herod missed out on wisdom? Where does his bad-heartedness come from?

Pat Bennett, theologian and scientist, in the Advent Series on conflict which Pádraig Ó Tuama hosted in 2021,* mentions that Herod comes from a tight place, an intersection of many pressures on his person, that he is “racially, an Arab, religiously, Jewish, culturally Greek and politically a Roman.” She says that there is, in this story of Herod, a “progressive contraction of space: he operates in an escalating fear which results in increasing actions to control, fuelled by anxiety.”

First, in the text, Bennett says, Herod is troubled and all Jerusalem, with him. Then his world shrinks to a council session with just the scroll keepers and the seers of his court. Finally we are told he meets in secret, with the magi, alone. Herod’s freedom is reduced as he closes himself off from the world. He effectively misses out on the sensual creativity, expansiveness and richness that is described by the character of Wisdom Sophia in the 1st reading.

So Herod’s decision-making process at a time of perceived threat is not rooted in wisdom, but in a need to impress, coupled with a fear of losing power. This sounds like the former Saul, before he was struck blind and experienced his vision—that of the

compassionate Jesus whom he was persecuting by pulling Christians from their homes for execution. Saul, like Herod, terrorized people.

When faced with conflict, Herod culminates in killing, even children, as Paul did. (The difference in these stories is that there is no historical evidence for a mass slaughter of the children, but Paul's conversion and explanation of his transformation is considered historically acceptable by most scholars.) Paul was responsible for the deaths of many.

On the other hand, Joseph and the magi, Bennett points out, are better acquainted with wisdom. They reveal tenderness. They both change direction when dreams and stars influence their decision-making. Their paths change, open up. Joseph, has been led by true wisdom. He followed the voice of his dream and embraced Mary and the child.

Bennett mentions that the Magi kneel down and offer gifts which are opened. Their decision-making in a time of uncertainty is one of "opening up" she says. Their path is fruitful, simply guided by the star. No need to manipulate others and secretly plan bad-hearted ends to those who are a threat.

What is the outcome of following wisdom? It is not necessarily as beautiful a result as the book of Sirach seems to suggest. Small Man Paul is writing from jail, in chains. However, whatever the physical experience of his surroundings, he is still in touch with wisdom. His words to the people in Ephesus speak of inclusivity, of acceptance. Those who were seen as aliens now have "full membership in the same body."

This openness draws strangers and all kinds of people closer — including itinerant travellers, women from all walks of life, LGBTQ2S — And what are we drawn to, why do we come?—We are drawn to the wisdom of Christ within us and all around us. We perceive that presence with our bodies.

This week I heard a story of 7 fishermen of various ages, mostly in their 30s, whose boat caught fire in July 2024, 17 hours from shore and they were lost at sea in a covered life raft like an orange tent on the cold Atlantic ocean for 52 hours. One of them was able to grab five life suits for warmth and flotation. Curiously the two non-swimmers went without.

To hear them tell their story was riveting.** How does wisdom stay alive in such conditions of no food, but sugar cubes and sips of water, no comfort with your knees tight up against your chest for hours on end, with no toilet, soiling your clothes, no hope of being found in the dense fog and the sounds of rescue helicopters fading away? Several things I remember from the podcast that sound like wisdom to me in light of the first reading from Sirach are: like cinnamon and frankincense: their prayer, the men prayed. Their remembering family is like seeing tall cypress trees of Love. Humour, pretending the flashlight was a reporter's microphone, "How's your fishing trip so far?" like radiant blossoms on a thorny rose bush. And compassion, cuddling one another on day three, in the cold, in despair, all personal pretences gone. Such raw comfort sounded like the sweetness of honeycomb.

All seven Newfoundlanders survived and drew closer to each other as friends. If we can move away from fear, from safety in secrecy and staying small and if we can open up to trust, to witness, and risk on the side of compassion and hope and share some of our gifts, like the magi opening their bundles, the world becomes wiser, more accepting, inclusive, and sustainable.

QUESTIONS: What did you notice in the readings/liturgy? When might you have missed out because of fear or a need to control? When has wisdom shown up powerfully, in something you've heard or seen or experienced sensually, something simply good, wisdom in our midst?

*Pádraig Ó Tuama interviews Pat Bennett in the "2021 Corrymeela Advent Series, Week 4" youtube

**52 Hours Lost At Sea CBC documentary by Catherine Mary MacIntosh <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/audio/9.6593566>